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# ONTOLOGICA

A Journal of Art and Thought

## Non-fiction Editor and Layout

Rod Dixon

## Fiction Editor and Web Development

Drew Lackovic

## Art Editor

Susane Andracki

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Cover Art: "In My Body" Anastasia Alexandrin

WPG Logo: Susane Andracki

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A=Art

F=Fiction

N=Non-fiction

## The Pharmacy

Your life, all stages of it, tragedies and triumphs, could fit onto a couple of pharmacy aisles. Good luck, girlfriend, the items on the shelves have been arranged for your convenience.

For the first few months you will stay in the diapers, wipes and baby bottles aisle. You are all set, as long as your diaper is dry and your stomach is not in a state of a violent uprising. Once you learn to crawl and realize that food is not always a liquid, you will move on to the aisle with little jars of yellow summer squash and boxes of Cheerios. Brace yourself. No matter how many times you spit out the summer squash, some unrelenting adult will be standing over you, ready to load the next spoonful into your mouth as if your name is Sisyphus. Hope it's not though, if it is, you already have a fairly large bone to pick with your parents.

You will spend the next few years in a rinse-wash-repeat cycle between the aisles with Halloween candy, sparkly holiday ornaments and chocolate Easter eggs. With time, an invisible hand will crank up the dial with which the aisles turn. That's not your problem yet. Your problem is the adults who are no longer satisfied by your ability to smile and blow bubbles. They now expect you to make words out of letters and thoughts out of words. They will take you to the aisle with pens, pencils and spiral notebooks. You will then go to school armed with a plastic lunchbox picturing a superfast talking race car, Spiderman or the Little Mermaid. You hope to meet them once you are old enough to drive.

Once you are old enough to drive, you will find out that superheroes do not exist and the Little Mermaid has been to rehab and is now working as the checkout clerk at the local Whole Foods. And you will move on to the next aisle – tampons and makeup. Anyone who says the trick to wearing makeup is to look like you are not wearing any has forgotten how it feels not to be taken seriously. Ignore them. Show up at the

dinner table wearing heavy liquid eyeliner, dark purple eye shadow and an orange lipstick. Your parents will have no choice but to treat you as an adult.

Don't bother with blush. Instead sneak into the condom aisle and watch the color of your cheeks naturally turn from rosy pink to deep scarlet. If condoms have yet to see any action and blue is more your color, check out the beer aisle. Casually stroll down the aisle while dozens of beer bottles will cheer you on from behind the glass like parade spectators cheer on a Thanksgiving float. Pick a six pack. And find someone to buy it for you.

What's in the aisle between condoms and beer? Pregnancy tests. Tons of boxes neatly stacked on the shelf all promising an early response, assuming you want to know. Do you want to know? There are only two possible answers on this test. Regardless of the one you get there is a 50% chance you will feel that you have failed.

If the test is negative, breathe out and run. Or go back to the beer aisle. If it's positive, in a few months you will be right back where you've started – in the diaper aisle.

Diapers, baby bottles, wipes, bibs, more diapers... How many diapers can one 9 pound thing use in a week? Do the math quickly, before you know it you will be standing in the next aisle buying birthday cake candles and pointy party hats. Picking party supplies the second time around, you know that you will need band aids. What kind? Here they are again, the superheroes and the Disney characters. The Little Mermaid is winking at you from the top shelf, claiming she has not used for years. She lies. Just like you lie when you kiss a scrape or a bruise and promise it to make it better. Your kiss is nothing without band aids and Neosporin. Forget the Little Mermaid and go with overachievers like Dora the Explorer or Thomas the Train. For years, Dora has been saving endangered penguins in the Antarctic and Thomas has been getting high on the magical island of Sodor... You? You have been staring into your coffee cup for what feels like years, hoping to wake up in a different place when you get to the bottom of it.

Why are you always so tired? Perhaps the vitamin aisle can help. The shelf reads like a wall in a kindergarten classroom – A, B, C, D, E, F, G... Each letter promises to

make your nails stronger, hair shinier, muscles leaner, legs faster or sleep better. But you are already running as fast as you can and pass out cold when you hit the pillow. What you need is vitamin T for time. If you could only take it to make time stretchier and more elastic like a pair of control top pantyhose in the next aisle. As for your hair and nails, you will use the extra time for a deep conditioning treatment and a manicure.

While there are plenty of control top pantyhose in all colors and sizes, there is no vitamin T. If only you could stuff time into one super-strong, belly-holding pair. You cannot. Time will spill out at the waistline into one gigantic muffin top proving once again that control top pantyhose are nothing more than a marketing ploy.

In a few years even vitamin T won't be enough and you will find yourself walking, or limping, to the next aisle. That aisle is filled with over the counter remedies: anti-acids, pain killers, sleeping pills, anti-inflammatory... Finally you got your kids under control, now your organs start to misbehave. You begin to compare notes with friends, meeting them in the waiting area by the prescription counter instead of that newly opened Asian Fusion restaurant, does their blood pressure fall and joints ache when it rains? You ask them how the surgery went, knee by replacement or bypass, and how the recovery is going. You agree that recovery is tough and ask what the doctor prescribed.

In fact, the doctor has been churning out prescriptions like cheap summer beach reads and you have been popping them like candy. You take them with food, before food, after food or if you no longer like food, and then you buy yourself one of those plastic pill containers not to confuse the pills. You read about the side effects and double check with the pharmacist in the window whether these medications could be taken together. The fonts on the pill jars keep getting smaller so you check out the stand with eye glasses. Are you nearsighted or farsighted? Perhaps you are both and can only see objects placed exactly one foot in front of your nose, give or take an inch. There are glasses for that too.

But no glasses can fix the fact that you no longer recognize your face when you look in the mirror. Who tied a couple of dumbbells to the corners of your eyes? How did

your mother's smile, strained and uncomfortable, make its way to your face? You shake your head in disbelief and note that you have grown a turkey neck.

Still all is not lost, not until you find yourself standing in front of the adult diaper shelf. You've passed this shelf and snickered at it for years so it would be ironic, to put it mildly, to find yourself in front of it now. Your mouth feels dry and you quickly scan the space around you to check if anyone is watching. And you thought buying condoms was embarrassing!

Do you still remember what you came here to buy in the first place? Your cart is packed with items you are no longer certain you need. You feel tired. After all, you've been to every aisle and now a hazy sleepy afternoon wrapped itself around you making your eyelids very heavy... It is time to go. You head for the revolving door. But don't forget that there is a security guard at the exit sign and a cashier apathetically chewing gum behind the counter, waiting to scan all of your chosen goods.

## A Tale of Two Penises

There is nothing more beautiful than Ray Ray's penis, but I won't be seeing it much longer because he just turned four. His days of running around the house naked with penis flapping and wild blond hair flying is coming to an end. My feelings about his penis have no unseemly connotations. I'm just fascinated by it because it's totally unlike mine—Ray Ray is uncircumcised.

Ray Ray isn't my only son. I have another, Eddie, who just turned seventeen. That's a long time between sons, but I'm on my second family. I raised Eddie after his mother left us many years before. I believe in privacy, so I can't remember the last time I saw Eddie's penis, but I know he's circumcised just like I am. Between the birth of my oldest and newest sons—my first and then second family—I researched and learned about circumcision. The more I learned, read and talked to people about it, the more *revulsion* I felt at the practice. I learned enough to leave my newest son intact, and I also developed deep regret for thoughtlessly altering my first son without so much as asking his opinion about his penis.

I started aggressively asking questions about circumcision when my current wife, Joy, got pregnant with Ray Ray almost five years ago. I had seen articles about the decline in the practice, and it got me wondering why so many people do it in the first place. I went to Eddie first, who was 13 at the time. I first explained the procedure that was done to me, and that I had also done to him. He was immediately horrified. Eddie taught me my first great lesson about this practice—it sounds shocking and violent when you remove the social context. If aliens came to earth and heard about the practice, it would sound like genital mutilation to them.

But this was one child's reaction. I still needed more information, so I asked our would-be pediatrician about it. He would not give me a straight answer whatsoever. If he had an opinion, it was the closest guarded secret at his practice. He referred me to

the statement from the American Pediatric Association, which is so neutral that it borders on neurotic in an attempt to avoid giving any clear guidance.

Fortunately, a very close childhood friend of mine is a doctor. We'll call him Doctor Wilberforce because I like the name, and because he asked me to protect his identity—and his practice. Wilberforce is a general practitioner with two boys of his own, so I asked him whether I should circumcise my second son.

"Make him look like you," said Wilberforce in all seriousness without one second of thought. He said this with both dismissal and finality, because we're good friends. He was able to forgo all the medical hemming and hawing.

"That's insane," I said. "That's no medical reason."

Wilberforce turned a question back to me. "You see a lot of uncircumcised dicks in porn?" He asked. "Ladies like and *expect* a circumcised penis," he added with authority.

The casual reader might be stunned, but these seem to be two of the most common arguments for cutting up a baby's sex organ. We ended our conversation there, but over the next week or two, we chatted back and forth, and Wilberforce sprinkled in some half assed medical reasons. There is a slightly reduced risk of some sexually transmitted diseases, which is a fair argument; however a condom will have much better results. Also circumcised penises are easier to keep clean, but the risk of infection in any case is minuscule with good hygiene.

This was my second big discovery in the process of investigating what is best for my own children. There is no compelling medical reason for this procedure. It's all "cultural norm" bullshit. It's no different than certain cultures that file the teeth of teenagers to a point in a painful rite of passage ceremony, or even other cultures still that practice "do-it-yourself" circumcisions performed on adolescents. The only difference is that when these practices take place in other cultures, Americans recoil in horror. Yet here in America we slice more wang than Wienerschnitzel, and many people think it's just fine.

I still didn't stop my research with just a couple doctors. I asked a guy from work who had grown up in Australia if it was considered "normal" to him.

"You bet," he said. "Chicks won't blow you if you ain't cut."

My guy friends are very direct, and I heard this statement from lots of men. It led me to the conclusion that American (and Australian) men are obsessed with getting blowjobs, although I think I already knew that. As I kept asking around, I grew very shocked at the lack of real justification. Everyone seemed focused on cosmetic reasons. After asking about Australia, I went back to the research to see what other countries recommend. Many countries including Canada and the Netherlands recommend *against* routine infant circumcision. There are also many places in Europe that have very low numbers of this procedure. Outside religious practices in England routine circumcision is all but extinct.

After the "no blowjobs," comment, I decided to go get a female take on it, so I asked my secretary. She was forty five with teased blonde hair, a Nevada version of a southern belle. "I think I may not get the baby circumcised," I said. "What do you think of that?"

"That's disgusting," she said, lips actually curling into a sneer.

"Whoa!" I said with a start. "You may *prefer* circumcision, but that doesn't mean it's 'gross' to leave it natural. Do you really think that?"

"I just think it's wrong," she said, and I had enough, so I walked out. I decided to stop asking casual acquaintances their opinions about it, because those opinions were all based on culture, emotion and tradition. I felt like my life was turning into a non-musical *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Speaking of Fiddler, there are religious edicts ordering circumcision in both the Islamic and Jewish faiths. As an atheist myself, I see these as unconvincing. However, I am worried less about people who have religious reasons for something and more concerned about people who are perpetrating this act for no reason at all. Outside religious reasons the practice seems to continue because of a lack of inquisitiveness more than anything else.

At this point, someone might wonder what my wife thought of all this circumcision angst, the questions, and my budding *anti*-circumcision feelings. Well the funny thing about dicks is that (generally) chicks don't have them, so my wife left it up

to me to decide for our son. Much later, I pressed her to really let me know her preference of cock (always a delicate question). She finally said. "I'm the kind of girl who falls in love with a man, not a dick."

And in one sentence she put to rest all that "she won't blow you" crap from my guy friends. If you meet the right woman—a good and loving partner—she won't care what you've done to your junk. She is going to love you, and you're gonna get plenty of oral sex.

I felt like I had to close the loop with my doctor friend, even before Ray Ray was born.

I called him up and told him that I felt there was no logical, medical reason for circumcision, but that it was also wrong to do it to infants who cannot give consent. He had two sons, just a little older than Ray Ray, and he had them both circumcised, so he got a little mad about it.

"You're just like those anti-vaccination people," he said.

I think parents who don't vaccinate kids against polio and smallpox are nutty. Diseases can kill a child, even in today's day and age, but altering the penis for aesthetic purposes has absolutely nothing whatsoever in common with vaccinations. If we are going to preemptively perform surgery, why not remove every child's appendix at birth?

We never have, to this day, agreed on this subject, but we are still good friends. He has gotten more understanding about my position, even as I have gotten more militant about the subject over the years. Wilberforce did give me some parting words before Ray Ray was born. "You like sex, and your junk works fine," he said. "Why even worry about it?"

I worried about it before Ray Ray was born, because circumcision is an ancient, unjustified cultural practice that inflicts needless suffering on boy babies every day. It's an act of sexualized violence perpetrated on babies just so our dicks can look like smaller versions of the late, great John Holmes. The whole process also taught me a third great truth about America: People hate when you question long-held cultural practices.

I announced my decision to *not* circumcise my son to everyone who would listen. Of all people, my mother was upset, not about my decision on Ray Ray, but about my growing disdain for the practice itself. She felt that when I rejected circumcision, it was also an indictment of her parenting. She became defensive on the spot and has been ever since.

"You turned out fine," she insisted. "That's just what they did back then," she added by way of justification.

As I watched my own mother squirm with her long-past decision to do something that I had recently discovered that I detested, I realized that I owed my oldest son an apology for the thoughtless act of circumcising him as an infant.

"I'm sorry I had you circumcised. I really didn't know what I was doing," I said to Eddie not long before Ray Ray joined the family.

"It's fine," he said. He never made a big deal out of it, even though I thought it was. Without his consent, I had him circumcised, because I just didn't know any better. I remember thinking about it when they asked me all those years ago. My gut reaction was that Eddie should "look like me," and I can never take back that flippant, momentary illogic.

When Ray Ray was born in 2007, I did not let anyone within ten feet of my boy's dick with anything sharper than an ink pen. As time has passed since his birth—and he is now four—I've become even more outspoken about circumcision. The combination of my first bad decision, followed by a chance to make it right has had a lingering effect on me. I still keep an eye on it, talk about it, even rant about it to my friends or family. And every new fact or bit of history I learn about circumcisions adds to my horror or disbelief that it still goes on.

For instance, the reasons for the procedure today are only the latest in a long line of unreasonable arguments. One of the reasons the procedure spread in the United States *historically* was the mistaken belief that it would prevent boys from masturbating. It was Victorian-age squeamishness of self-love that got these balls rolling. As the years passed and sentiment about masturbation eased, the reasoning

has continued to morph and twist in desperate attempt to keep up some rational for this antiquated, anachronistic, and (I think) violent practice.

Male circumcision is even cited in the present day as an excuse for some cultures that practice female “circumcision” or, as it’s rightfully called, female genital mutilation (FGM). For the uninitiated, FGM is the practice of removing some or all of the external genitalia of a female baby or more likely a small girl child. The reason for FGM is often to keep a woman “pure”—a very similar rationale used for male circumcision those many years ago.

Despite the best efforts of the United Nations, many nongovernmental organizations, and women’s health groups, “we” can’t seem to stop FGM in other cultures. When we demand that these cultures stop this brutal practice, many in those cultures point back to our prevalence of male circumcision. This may not be a fair comparison, but the use of one to justify the other is reason enough to ban male circumcision. As with male circumcision, sometimes those who perpetrate FGM cite religious or cultural reasons. It is so easy to dismiss the cultural norming process in FGM—it is a barbaric practice—why then can’t we lose the religious baggage when it comes to boys?

As I was writing about this subject, I revisited Doctor Wilberforce and some other friends of mine in an online chat to pose some of these questions and to share my conclusions. The reactions were less enthusiastic than I had hoped.

“This is a crap essay,” wrote Rob, another childhood chum with two boys of his own. The sort of hostility of the debate itself seems to indicate that the procedure is shrouded in too much emotion. I realized when talking to Rob that I do not want to criticize the parents of circumcised boys, especially my friends and family members who have done it. There are reasonable-sounding justifications from respected doctors and organizations that argue fervently for circumcision. There *are* several rare cancers and some hygiene problems that are slightly reduced by circumcision, all outlined on the pro-circumcision site [www.circinfo.net](http://www.circinfo.net). Although there can be arguments made, it’s all terribly muddy. In the event of a tie, shouldn’t we err on the side of letting the

individual decide what's best? By individual I do not mean parents, rabbis or imams but rather boys and men.

Even the "strong" case made by *circinfo* shows a shadowy nature. In their own "ten point summary" of the benefits of circumcision one point reads: "More favorable hygiene for the man's sexual partner." This again amounts to altering the natural state of a human being to meet the preference of some theoretical partner. My favorite is their last point. After making some arguments on medical reasons for the procedure, the list ends with the claim that circumcision results in "... a penis that is regarded by most men and women as being more attractive." Really? Personal penis aesthetics cited in a so-called medical debate? Should we then buy all our baby girls breast implants? This debate always seems to end up with the final justification being all men's dicks should look like the ones on television. And this is from the most strident pro-circumcision group I could find.

There is a lot of information and a lot of passion on both sides of the debate, and I blame the medical establishment in large part. I don't think it's fair of the medical community to be so ambivalent about a procedure that is so *permanent*. I agree with some anti-circumcision people when they argue that it's a human rights issue to enforce penis norms on an infant. The good news is, like many senseless bigotries or customs; it only takes one generation of enlightened men and women to stop the penis-hacking violence.

We (the anti-circumcision) people are already "winning" in many ways. Circumcision is down from the all time highs of the 70s, when I was born. There is an active anti-community, and many countries, notably Canada, have rejected routine circumcision. Today I really can't understand why we (Americans, Westerners, humans, etc.) cut up healthy penises in the first place.

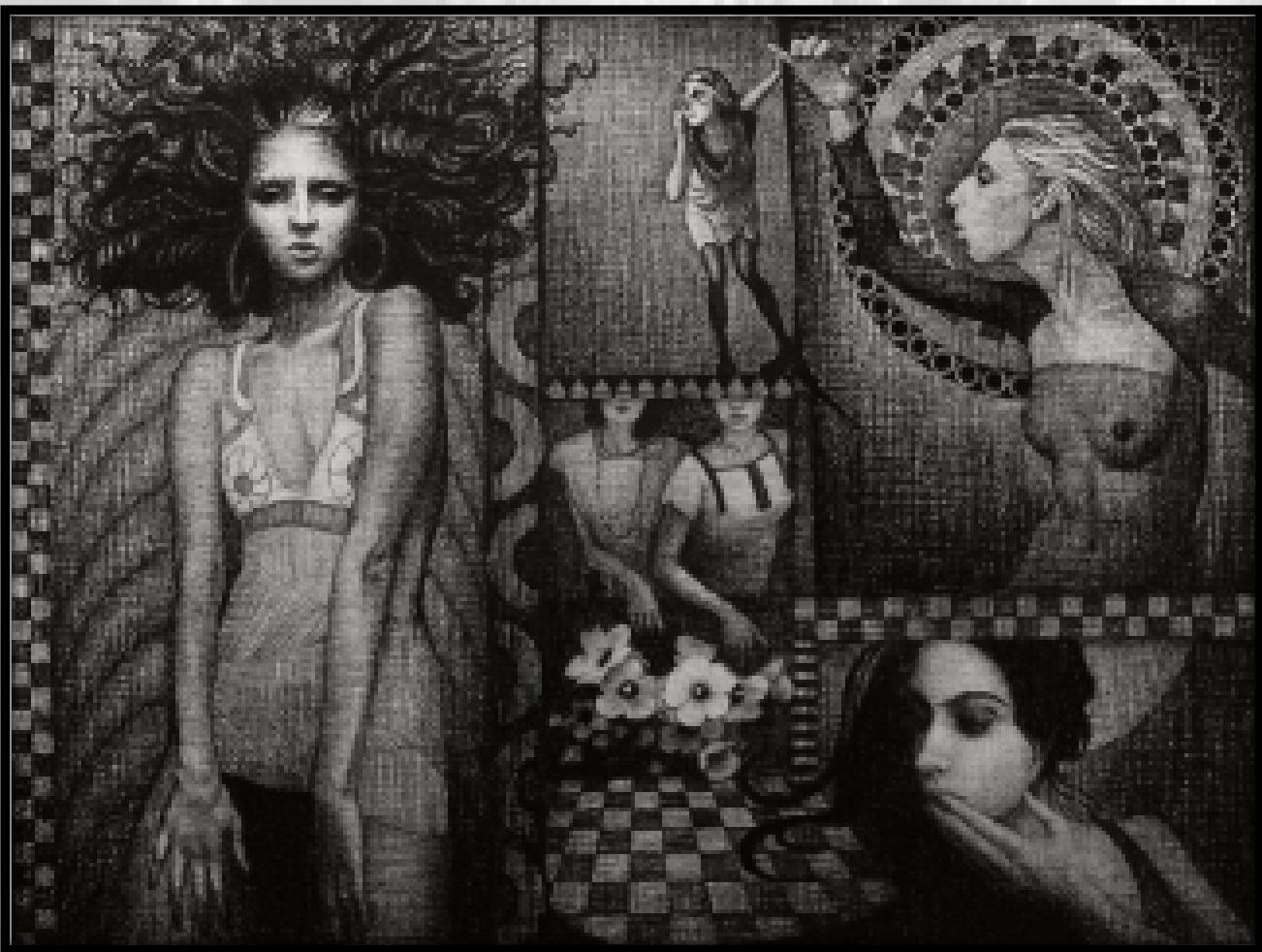
I understand many people's hesitation about revisiting a decision like circumcision. When I came the realization that I had made a mistake—an unchangeable misdeed—by circumcising Eddie, it was a painful moment. But parenting is a crap shoot always, and I'll make many, many more mistakes before Ray Ray is

grown up. If I have learned only one thing about being a parent, I hope it is to admit my mistakes and apologize to my children when I feel like I've done wrong.

I am a circumcised man, and I have successfully reproduced with a surgically altered penis. I still like sex (very much in fact), and my old fellow works fine. But could it have *felt* better? Did I suffer when I was cut? In my day, they didn't care about the pain of a baby. Pain mitigation is new, and in fact in Victorian times many people thought circumcision pain would reduce a boy's tendency to derive pleasure from sex. When you get down to it, my dick belongs to me. It is my body, and I did not consent to have it changed at birth. Much worse, out of ignorance, I perpetrated the same act on my own son. There is no convincing medical evidence to argue either way, according to the medical community itself, so in my book the tie must go to the wiener—that is, leaving it intact.

[Anastasia Alexandrin](#)

## My Circus



## Boxing Anderson

Bloom once said some patriarchal shit about writers who can't help but write under the posthumous shadow of their elders. So convincing, too, that I believed it for just having read Bloom's damn book. It was then no small matter that such adumbration would seek to overcome me. As if that shadow had a life of its own, and I guess shadows do, I would soon be boxing Anderson's.

### First Round

*If you want to make it here, you get in with Anderson, everyone said.*

I was a bit incredulous. Really, of any man who would Scotch tape the covers of his new masterpiece to his office door. Then run around the English department telling everyone how to buy his latest on Amazon. But he published more than anyone else. He was a toast, a totem, a god. Of sorts.

### Second Round

He kept a chair in his office that was...well, put it this way, was lower than his. No matter what he said or where you were when he said it to you, you were lower. Ironically, he was a very short man. And short men are always trying to be taller...somehow. But, Anderson had never been in a fight...a real brawl. He wore cardigans and was constantly at odds with the department's mainstay...criticism.

"No statue," he said to all his students, "was ever erected to a critic."

He always paused at the word, "erected." And glared at "critic."

### Third Round

I began to seek out Anderson for publishing advice. I had the sense he both loved and loathed that...particularly in novices like me.

"Are simultaneous submissions really that dangerous, if, say, two mags want the work?"

"Yeah, well, I don't pay attention to that. But, you know, what an interesting problem to have."

I discarded any anxiety over simultaneous submissions. And, so far, have not had that interesting problem. I hate Anderson's bravado but fall in love with the posture of his logic. But then began the fourth round.

### Fourth Round

My first poem anthologized. He said, "Excellent." I know what he meant: beginner's luck. The poem is strong, has potential, I think, but was not ready to be sent out. I sent it anyway...hungry as I was for a win, for a base hit, for something to tape to my office door. I am dying to tell everyone but, for some reason that's not quite clear to me, I haven't. I did, however, add the forthcoming entry to my thin CV. I put everything on my CV. A CV is a diary, a shoulder, a cry into the abyss.

### Fifth Round

Anderson is sick and asks me to take his creative writing class. I'm auditing the class...because I'm somehow his Adso of Melk (*The Name of The Rose*. Umberto Eco) and need access to our little abbey's library of writerly truth that will lead me to a second published poem. "Sure," I said (see just below this paragraph). I never asked

him what's wrong. Not that I don't want to hear but I know he doesn't want to make our fight personal. I almost said "relationship" but typed "fight" instead.

"Sure."

(I'll find out later he's having a colonoscopy or something old like that.)

"Fine. We're doing one liners. Have them read the line and talk about why they think it works."

"Ok."

"Fine."

"Sure."

#### Sixth Round

I make Anderson's apologies to the class and crack a joke about being under orders to report back that at least one of them was supposed read a line from one of Anderson's books. I'll tell you now, to get it over with, no one did. I don't recall what I later told Anderson. Well, of course I do, but that unfolds later. In case you haven't realized, Anderson put his own book on the syllabus and spends a good to inordinate amount of the class reading selected passages from it. Each time seemingly more pleased with himself. He reads well. He's practiced in the art of reading. It's almost as if he is acting out the part of a narrator, who is cast to play the part of a reader, who is being paid to read his own work to people he's made buy his own book. None of that matters. He reads well. Reads so well that it might not matter if he were reading Hamlet (which he can't do) or a cereal box. Reading well is his art. What one notices about his work...the reading of his work...is that it is a cereal box. Same shape, same amount of vitamin C, same FDA approved daily percentage of fat and fiber. Take five brands of five different cereals and, save the occasional odd raisin or nut or sugar-coated flake, it's all the same shit. The boxes are different. Well, categorically, not

accidentally speaking. The flakes box has a picture of a dog on it. The nut brand has an elderly couple on a tandem bike. It's cereal. Serial? Serial cereal? It's published and for sale on Amazon.

### Seventh Round

The one liners are good. Thoughtful, mostly. We're half way through when I get a chance to interject from my seat of power and authority about the difficulty of pulling off a successful list. I might have been in a *Fringe* episode. One of the shape shifter scenes where, in this case, half of my face is me (shape shifter me) and the other is Anderson. One of my hands has his wedding ring on it and my/his voice is now ours. The trouble is that I am fully conscious of this morphological episode and can see and hear myself becoming Anderson. All of the sudden I am pleased with myself nearly beyond my capacity to contain the very pleasure by which I am pleased. If Anderson walked in at this moment, I would be fucked. I appear like a stand in, stand up, stand. I am him. Here's what I/him say.

*A list has to make sense without revealing what is informing the logic behind it. They want to appear random and stable at the same time. They have to be ontologically evident without disclosing the valency which holds them together. The metaphysics of a good list derives from the idea that the parts...the items*

(here I am pretending to be Anderson pretending to struggle for the word I've rehearsed for the past 25 years as if I/he was reading from a book of wisdom that young shits like these have no clue about because they haven't been there ("being there" is big for Anderson) and about to achieve what we call brilliance)

*are all connected by something ineffable*

(here I slip...Anderson would never say ineffable because 1) he knows everything and 2) that word sounds like something adamncriticwoudlsay).

*You just feel it. It just works. Yeah, you see, it just works.*

I don't realize it right away but I am leaning back in my seat of power and authority with my hands splayed out on the table in front of me, my feet spread about the distance of a yardarm, and all of the students are nodding in unison. They are drugged by my/his voice, hoodwinked by my/his word choice, lost and found in a state of homogenized and utter credulity. I am so convincing and convinced I swear I could have been, might have been, and probably will be reading a cereal box.

### Eighth Round

He would never ask. I was to report.

"The class went well. We made it around the whole room."

"Good."

And then I had to say it.

"Some did poems, others did stuff from Hemingway and Easton (Bret). Oh, I did one from your book."

The Grinch never smile so wickedly.

"Really? How'd that go?"

"Well. I think they liked it. I did a list."

"Really, which?"

"The classifieds."

"That's a good one. Really works, you know."

I didn't tell him I had to borrow the book from someone in the class. Just between us, I tell you that little secret was like the last stick of gum furtively inserted, chewed, and discarded at precisely the right instant at the end of a first date.

"You know, you got street cred. That last piece of yours was good."

I was auditing the class and had to do all the assignments like everyone else. Read, write, and recite. That was the formula. The piece to which he was referring came from an assignment where we had to write about a serial killer and a lake without saying it was about any of those things. So, I made my killer drown a little girl in broad day light while she reaching for a penny (in a lake).

### Ninth Round

There is usually a sign on Anderson's door that reads ETA 1200. That's the tacit privilege of a tenured professor and one of the manifold ways in which the department celebrates his genius. On one such occasion, albeit one more explicit, the department head had decided (or been told) that select faculty may have the opportunity to read their favorite passages from Anderson's new book at a soiree intended specifically for the purpose. My forehead sweats as I can feel myself shifting tenses. I am snapping all the pencils in my cup. I don't have a favorite passage and will not have had the time to discover one. Thus I begin assiduously thumbing through his new book (there's a loaner copy which I promptly snapped up from the secretary's desk) until I stop at a passage about a bridge. Bridges are huge metaphors and the fact that this passage details one he saw while taking a drive with his father is all the more reason to choose it. Besides, I enjoy the idea of a bridge. That is, ever since reading Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge," which it was in my infamous past a poem I knew by heart and was wont to read drunk at sundry undergraduate gatherings. Now I just needed a way to introduce

my/his particular passage. Then it occurred to me...I'd seen it before. Surely not someone else's. No. In his last book. Sure enough, there it was, repeated from that to this. Not an echo but each solid word stamped letter for letter. Why? This was not a work of new and *selected* writings. Pure audacity. Before I realized he had reprinted the passage from his older (first) book, I was almost late for the ritual. In my prelude to the reading, I had determined that two thirds of the old book appeared in the new book. Now I was pissed and could feel the great shadow gathering over me like a gas mask or MRI tube.

"Anderson, I'm one of your readers."

"Great, what?"

"That passage about the bridge and your father."

"Oh."

That he wasn't impressed with my selection wasn't half as concerning as the disappointment he expressed at my not having chosen something else, something better. How could I have excluded so many other moments of brilliance, I thought he thought.

"I noticed it comes from your earlier work," I said, knowing he would like my allusion to the idea that he had volumes of prior genius. Then, simultaneously, we both realized how I would open my reading.

#### Tenth Round

*Good afternoon, I began.*

*I've chosen a passage some of you may recognize from Anderson's earlier work. So, before I begin, I have an observation and a confession. First, and most importantly*

*on this occasion, I was struck with my own budding admiration for a colleague and writer who has reached that point in his career where he can now, and with complete...*

(here I begin "searching" for just the right word)

*impunity, cite himself in his own work. So, cheers! The other less important note I must confess for having chosen this particular passage is that I haven't as yet purchased a copy of his latest endeavor*

(I told you)

*and was therefore thankful enough to find that this passage, like the very bridge it describes, reaches from a past volume*

(which I do own)

*to this, our present gift.*

Anderson was beaming. Save from those in the crowd who have unabashedly (and ashamedly) attempted this in their critical work, a chuckle emerged from the crowd. No one was quite certain if I had just paid Anderson a compliment or passed on an insult to the purported literary critics in the department whose footnotes to themselves always seemed too ridiculous to mention (no one was reading them in the first place and, in the event you were, by accident, why would one bother to dig up the reference—which no one read, anyway?). My read was cautious and respectful. It was a good piece. It just works, you know. Then, the most curious thing. When I was finished, I stepped out from behind the podium and the faculty with whom I was sitting for the duration began congratulating me and patting me on the shoulder. Saying, "Great job," "Nicely done," "Nice one," and so on. How did I go from lowliest vassal to esteemed Sir I'm still not certain but began to feel as if I was being recognized for my

liturgical prowess. I was being thanked for paying proper reverence. The bridge was collapsing. The shadow was shadowing. Anderson shot me a look that I will never forget. As I lifted a glass to him from across the room, his face hollowed into an unbenighted grimace

(which was the only way he smiled after a fashion of gratitude...something about a pinched nerve made it that way)

and returned the gesture with his own glass. It was as if he said,

*It's on, fucker.*

or

*I love you, son.*

or

*You don't get to sit in my chair anymore.*

If it weren't for the fact that everyone was dressed for a literary event, there would have been a bell, we would have emerged from opposing corners, circled in toward the center of the ring, and started throwing punches.

Edward A. Dougherty

## Lessons in Totalitarianism: *seeking the path of love-acted-out*

During the day, the glass-walled lounge was always warm and quiet; people read or slept on the soft chairs. That night and most times I went to the meetings, the Fishbowl, as everyone called it, was nearly filled with Christians standing in small clusters, talking intently. It was a Campus Crusade for Christ meeting.

These people encouraged me to read the Bible for myself and to take what it says seriously. There were many parts I was knew well from weekly Mass and occasionally serving daily Mass as an altar boy, but there were passages before and after those familiar readings I never knew about, and whole books in the Bible I'd never cracked. It was good to read a whole letter of Paul's to get the context of a passage I thought I understood. And it was good to gather together in someone's dorm room to talk about God, about Bible-values, about living what it said. It brought an experience to the words I'd heard about "where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst."

I continued to attend Mass and enjoyed the enrichment of increased study and devotion. I invited my born-again roommate who'd gotten me to go to Campus Crusade to my Catholic ritual; he found a lot of it "not Biblical." He liked parts, too, but only went that once. After nearly five months of intimate spiritual discussions, that night in the HUB Fishbowl, I was posed questions I'd been asked before; I was challenged in a way that made it my last Campus Crusade for Christ meeting. One man I remember well but not clearly: tall, neatly dressed in a sport-shirt, blonde-haired. His tidy, informal attire hint to me now that he may have been part of the leadership team.

Why do you call priests, "Father," when in Matthew 23: 9 Jesus says, "And call no one on earth your father, for you have one Father, the one in heaven" (NRSV)? Why

do you pray to saints when Jesus is our perfect High Priest and mediator with the Father? Where in the Bible does it say the pope is infallible?

These questions—along with ones about Mary, the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession), and other Roman Catholic dogma—were not put to me in a seeking spirit, but in a spirit of correction. It was time, I was told, to purify my faith. “Why,” asked the blonde man sincerely, “do you still go to a service that kills Jesus again and again? His blood was shed once, and the sacrifice on Calvary was enough. Don’t you think it’s a little presumptuous of man to try to improve on what God has done?”

Convinced of their truth, backed by Holy Scripture, and using the depths of their sincerity and concern for my soul, these people were undermining the authority—the Roman Catholic Church—that had instructed me in what was True. And, what was most troubling, they were doing it with an ultimate Authority of their own. It was a standoff. More confounding, though was how in some ways, we both invoked the same Authority to support different points. I was taught from childhood that salvation is achieved in the Catholic Church because under the mantle of the Church, which Jesus founded, I could receive the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, the actual trans-substantiated Body of Christ. Catholics take the passages referring to the Last Supper quite literally: where Jesus said, “This is my body,” he changed the *matter* of the bread. “Do this in remembrance of me” is a command to continue this miracle. But those at Campus Crusade for Christ were taking other passages from the Holy Book to cast my beliefs in question.

Both of us couldn’t be entirely correct. One or both was in error and had to change to more closely follow Christ.

I never went back to Campus Crusade, not because I thought I was right but because I felt judged. I was willing to listen and consider the truth of their position. I tried to understand. I wanted to learn. I’m not claiming sainthood—by no means. All I’m saying is: in a search for Truth and spiritual authenticity, I was being asked to renounce. I was being asked to disclaim not only elements of belief but my claim on the source of those beliefs. I know those who agree with Crusade doctrine would feel justified in putting someone at such a crossroads, but it struck me as presumption.

So, for the next two years after stopping my participation with Campus Crusade, I was deeply involved with the Catholic campus ministry. Fundamentalism, the return to the foundation through a literal interpretation and understanding of the Bible, was always a lively issue. Many Catholics at Penn State and countless other schools had experiences like mine in the Fishbowl. Fundamentalism challenges what and how we construct Jesus' message. I used to say the heart of the issue was the literal reading of Scripture, but that's not the whole story because Catholics take certain sections very literally as I pointed out earlier, or the ability to forgive sins that Jesus bestowed on the apostles in John 20: 22-3. No, literalness is not the true issue.

If such word-by-word holy truth were the root concern, who could follow such Biblical mandates as Paul's exhortation in Romans 13:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good behavior, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. (NRSV)

In light of the murderous governments of the twentieth century, can we still believe that God institutes and "ordains" (in the King James Version) each and every civil government? Rationalizations become necessary to transform such passages into a livable ethic in the face of history. Perhaps, one might say, God supports the principle of government without which our lives together would be chaos. Clearly, Paul's speaking of civil authority correcting injustices, so if one lives justly and honestly, then one has nothing to fear from any just government. Still, "be subject to the governing authorities" is unequivocal; in the NIV, it's more compelling: "All of you must be willing to obey completely those who rule over you."

Perhaps, this is all too general with too many dimensions, depending on the nation in question and the era. How about the specific question of one person owning another?

Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are members of the church; rather they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved. Teach and urge these duties.. (Timothy 6: 1-2 NRSV)

How can I be judged by a book that defends slavery (though some translations soften this support by using “servants” or those “forced to serve as slaves” (NIV) and surrenders to Nazis or submits to the Taliban?

When we speak of totalitarianism, visions of Stalin’s Soviet Union or Hitler’s Third Reich or Saddam’s Iraq march quickly to mind. When compared to such brutality and horrors, our petty judgments about a line or two of a sacred text seem harmless, but such a measure compares the wrong way. Our goal isn’t “relative innocence” in contrast to the darkness of evil.

The central issue concerning fundamentalism is not one of literalness but of absolutes, a kind of totalism, not regarding God but regarding other people. If I believe—a matter of faith—I have an indubitable Authority, whether it’s the Bible or the Roman Catholic Church, then I don’t need to listen to anyone but that Authority and maybe other people who follow it. And, if the stakes are high enough, as they are with eternal life or eternal suffering, then I am not only entitled but encouraged—even commanded—to inform others of the errors of their ways. Here is where conviction blends into fanaticism so often associated with Muslims and the Middle East, with terrorists and violence. This sense of absoluteness is very easy to find in others, but another experience helped locate the center of totalism in myself, which also shaped my spiritual journey.

At Penn State many denominations of Christianity as well as other faiths had campus ministries in what was then called the Eisenhower Building. I spent much time in the small chapel where the Eucharist is housed for devotion, and also at the Catholic campus ministry its offices on the second floor. Downstairs, in the basement, was an

Islamic prayer room. Muslims removed their shoes before disappearing from my vision as well as my imagination. They weren't even Christian, I thought, so why should I deal with them? It wasn't quite so callous or deliberate an attitude, but I never "bothered" with them.

One evening my born-again roommate and I got to talking with a Muslim student. Of course, we talked on and on about God, but I left early for some reason; I was confused. Part of me couldn't take him very seriously because I knew that Jesus was God's Son and had come to earth to redeem us by his blood. I believed humans are fallen creatures who need God's mercy, and the only road to forgiveness is sacrifice; Jesus' death on the cross was the supreme and perfect sacrifice—He was the innocent victim, the scapegoat for our sins. Despite my differences with Campus Crusade for Christ, my roommate and I shared this belief.

This man, a devout man who had studied his tradition deeply, did not believe that Jesus was God's Son, and had Authority for his faith, the Koran. When we got back to the room, my friend imitated him, "The Koran," he said pointing to the ceiling, "it is of God."

The Bible is "of God."

Can both books be *The Word of God*? Who is right? How do we know?

If the Muslim is wrong will he be barred from eternal reward for denying the Christ despite his piety, devotion, and disciplined prayer? If the Muslim is right, well then...

And once we consider this, we must think of the millions of devout Hindus and Buddhists who consider our life as humans only as one sojourn in a countless cycle of appearances. These believers have a different sense of time, of the soul, as well as of God. Do they laugh when Christians say that we believe that a human sacrifice was needed by God to pay the debt people owed for sin, or when Christians say that Mary remained a virgin, conceiving Jesus by the Holy Spirit with no man involved? Do they dismiss them as "fables" or "myths"? (I'll never forget Dr. Charles Prebish recounting the conception and birth of the Buddha, then answering the snickers in class by saying that it was only as "absurd" as a virgin birth!)

From these two experiences—one where I was judged and my beliefs discounted, even repudiated, and the other where I judged and repudiated another's—I learned that there is danger in becoming so absolute in my beliefs that I cannot see the faith and truth in another. If I hold so absolutely to a list of essentially unprovable things that I fail to love—the behavior that enlivens those beliefs—then I myself deny those beliefs. I began to feel this censure in my other behaviors and in my reading as well.

Here is a story from Rev. Anthony de Mello's collection of disciple/Master encounters, called *One Minute Wisdom*, named because each potent story only takes about 60 seconds to read.

To the disciples' embarrassment the Master once told a bishop that religious people have a natural bend for cruelty.

"Why?" demanded the disciples after the bishop had gone.

"Because they all too easily sacrifice persons for the advancement of a purpose," said the Master. (95)

Seeing my own capacity for cruel sacrifice of people to the purpose of "conversion" or "communion," I saw how those beliefs were diminished by my own behavior. The experience of feeling judged and misunderstood convinced me that no one deserves that sensation. I dedicated myself to trying to understand people who seem different and to trying to see situations and people through the eyes of the victims.

In the fullest description of the afterlife that Jesus gives in the Gospels (Matthew 25), he separates people, not according to what they believe or even in whom but according to their love-acted-out in care for the hungry and thirsty poor, the sick, prisoners, and homeless. These righteous ones always ask, "When did we see you like that?" not recognizing the Holy One in their midst. "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (NRSV).

Through encounters with community organizers in West Virginia and Kentucky on behalf of coal miners and the rural poor, with homeless advocates in Philadelphia and Springfield, Massachusetts, with activists working to realign our military policies

(and spending) with values of justice and equality, I have come to question many of the beliefs I held so strongly.

Witnessing people living radical love and my own small efforts in that same direction led me to a conviction that when we touch the heart of the Divine, we experience the unity of all things and a love that bursts the wine skins. This unconditional regard reaches beyond economic class, occupation, race, gender, national boundary, even religion—maybe especially religion. When we touch this love, we are stirred to aid the suffering, right injustice, and cultivate this compassion in others.

My conviction and the witness of others eventually led me to Quakerism, particularly a book called *Quiet Rebels*. The consistent, humble expression of love for prisoners, slaves, war-victims, Native Americans, and the confident insightful awareness of women's equality felt like a lock had clicked in place or a seed had instantly germinated and sprouted. Such a small group has had a tremendous influence! I sought them out and their silent worship, which I first experienced after leaving Campus Crusade for Christ and after I had begun a little meditation. The hour of seeking together was refreshing, invigorating, and challenging all in one gesture.

Two articles of faith that resonated within me have become my guide in matters of orthodoxy and authority. First is the unity of the Spirit, not bound by creed or any other human category. Second is that communion with this Spirit bears fruit.

From a very early age, I have been seeking God; at my Catholic high school, I took more religion courses than were required (unheard of!), including World Religions. I always imagined there are others who grew up with the training, passion, and conviction that I did, only in completely other beliefs. When I read what William Penn wrote in 1693, I feel like a hollow bell struck—it still rings true: "The humble, meek, merciful, just, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know each other though the divers liveries they wear here makes them strangers" (qtd. in New York Yearly Meeting 7).

When I start from a faith in the unity of the Spirit, my interaction with others becomes a search for truth and purity, not error and heresy. It also raises my own

humility by recognizing that I cannot contain the whole and continuous Truth. This humble search then opens me to a wider community. John Woolman wrote,

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath had different names. It is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren. (qtd. in New York Yearly Meeting 8)

In silence and open dialogue with others, this Truth can be known or at least glimpsed. This is part of the purpose of prayer and meditation. I have always felt this. George Fox, the Society of Friends' founder, wrote that we should "take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts, which are the leadings of God" (qtd. in New York Yearly Meeting 20). The silent meetings for worship, waiting and testing such leadings, brings me to the Authority which enlivens all churches and creeds, which writes holy books, which helps understand them, and which ultimately helps us live them.

Rather than Church teachings alone, the Bible alone, or any other authority, the Spirit who gives rise to them will teach us our path. We must seek, listen, wait. Then obey. In questions of morality, I rely on a standard Quaker story. William Penn, wealthy aristocrat, sought out Fox because he was in a dilemma over his new conviction that Christians cannot be soldiers. Aristocrats always wore swords. When Penn asked him about it, Fox trusted the man's conscience and the work of the Spirit to enable him to do what is right. "Wear thy sword as long as thou canst," he said (Bacon 18).

Now I try to rely on the promptings of love and truth, on a community of seekers, and on the exercise of those promptings—all these bear fruit. Jesus often said you can judge people's faith by the fruit they bear. This standard was given to me by a Christian Brother spiritual director when I was seeking through fundamentalism. He quoted from Galatians: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things." (NRSV). Whenever action manifests these, the Spirit is at work. Whenever

there is hatred, envy, quarrels, anger, sexual impropriety, self-indulgence, the Spirit is needed. I am often surprised to read how many of these signs relate to violence, fighting, and conflict rather than sex, another reason I respond so deeply to Quakerism's traditional testimony against war and for nonviolent conflict resolution.

Putting this middle way into language strips all the anguish out of it. For example, my spouse and I spent two and a half years at the World Friendship Center in Hiroshima, Japan. We found ourselves working with a whole range of people like artists, political activists, Christians and Buddhists because we approached the idea of "peacemaking" very broadly. In Japan, many Buddhists' spiritual practice animates them mostly at a ritual level, and typically only around funeral arrangements. Therefore, it was certainly easier to recognize Woolman's idea of a "pure principle" in the Buddhist priest we met who wasn't interested in only being a funeral director. He raised money and awareness for people in need, to express Buddhist compassion. When we spoke of compassion as an active force, we sensed our kindredness, despite the differences in language (which made expressing such complex ideas difficult), culture, and religion.

However, crossing boundaries like this causes me to feel like a contrary man, not fitting into any established group and not advocating clearly or forcefully for any cause. Some of the hardest expressions of seeking to align with the "promptings of love and truth" come when in the company of our "brethren." I felt the pain of this once when in Washington, DC, with thousands of other citizens voicing our opposition to another Iraq War. I remember the warmth and camaraderie I felt surfacing from the subway and seeing streams of people converging on the Mall. All stripes of people were in communion, with a common purpose: there were Peace and Justice Catholics, labor unionists, busloads of Mennonites, whole congregations of Methodists (it seemed), and Buddhists chanting for peace. When the march rounded toward the Naval Yard, though, I could feel people's "natural bent for cruelty" come out. A chant went up and was launched against whatever service members could hear: Ho-ho, hey hey! How many babies did you kill today?" Instantly, I felt exiled, a stranger in a strange land. I have always sought out the conviction of Veterans for Peace and other people who've worn

the uniform but came to refuse. These are my brethren. I knew that some of them could be in the Navy right at that moment, listening to such meanness, and their hearts would be hardened. That is not the fruit of the Spirit.

Likewise, when in gathered stillness with fellow Quakers, and one of us begins praying to Jesus, those with a more universalist spirituality tense up. When our Meeting decided whether or not to share our building with a Queer Church (which, oddly, manages to be Biblically literalist in many ways), it took many rounds and great effort to listen through wording to what each heart was expressing. We didn't come to unity on the issue of renting the building, mostly because of practical reasons (insurance, ADA compliance, and the building inspection that revealed structural flaws). But those of us who hunkered down and met often for dialogue felt the bonds of community strengthened through that process. We sought to hear the sincerity behind their quoted scriptures and our reluctance to rent. For some, the long, painted nails and drag outfits, the speech patterns and gestures were just too much. Listening to the promptings of love and truth is difficult: the strain of these conversations sent one Quaker away forever.

In an everyday example, I served on a work committee with representatives from all levels of the institution, but the president was a hard man to work with. Essentially a narcissist, he always reflected others' points of view refracted through his own, or worse consulted others simply so that he could say he had consulted. Those meetings caused me to knot inside and to carry on ranting rebuttals in my mind even hours or days later. I lost sleep contending with this person. A breakthrough came when I recalled the wise mantra of another Quaker I'd met years earlier who had a similar work dynamic. She said that all the while she was listening, she'd intone to herself: "What is the loving response? What is the loving response?" I knew I'd made progress when I was able to laugh at one point during a meeting and say simply, "That's not true, as far as I know. The minutes say different." And there was no sea of boiling acid in my stomach. I didn't want this man to "be shown up" or to "get his." At that moment, anyway. Instead, I felt stable in the truth as I knew it, and so could

express it without anger or resentment. Maybe someday, I'll be able to do so with a modicum of love too.

Rather than relying on an existing authority, one I must apply to new situations, I prefer leaving the question open. The answer to "Which authority?" becomes static, fixed. Even when pressed, the Divine wouldn't give a name but I Am Who Am, or I Am Who I Am, which is a whisper to listen for. It keeps me on alert to the unrepeatable braiding of forces moving to form each situation, and it keeps me lively to ways love can be expressed in it.

I have certainly come far from the long nights in Penn State dorm rooms interpreting a verse or two of the Bible. I have come to believe that I must practice love far more than preach it (or preach anything else for that matter). I have come to the conviction that we much enlarge our hearts by opening them to the Spirit and we will learn what response is needed. Our hearts grow true by drawing close to elemental things—silence, water, soil, wind, rock; our hearts grow wise by learning to recognize our neighbor not only in those nearby but also in people who live far from us in custom and belief, even to those whom we deem enemies; our hearts grow peaceful by treating them with all the dignity and respect and compassion we can muster. By this path, whatever effect it has on others, I will be made more human and so more holy.

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## Notes on Levinas

### I.

Late at night I tossed about, tormented by a passage that was assigned to me. During my graduate work, I had anticipated Levinas' response to Heidegger so long that, once it finally arrived, the outcome was quite different. I found a particular section of his *Existence and Existents* on "the horror of darkness" entirely unique, and thereby it was fascinating, but equally troublesome.

In the night, where we are riveted to it, we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness...This universal absence is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence...What we call the I is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it. The disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which *one* participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously.<sup>1</sup>

These lines tore through my head, and as Heathcliff says, they "sent sleep to the devil for me."<sup>2</sup> The question of their deepest meaning proved relentless, but this confusion was not the usual sort. I felt the book had missed something.

Having sufficiently worn myself out, I relaxed just enough to slip into nightmare. It was to be the most lucid dream of my experience, but as always, I can remember only fragments.

## II.

I walked along a wooded path, a rough lane of stone, with large trees overhanging both sides. Behind me was a forest that seemed untouched for hundreds of years, its shapes dense, angular, eccentric and threatening. I looked up intermittently as I fled its un-pierce-able mass, and found more dark arms hovering.

I recall thinking: Were the day thirty minutes younger, I could walk beneath these crooked limbs without the slightest fear—but as it started to vanish, so too did my chance to belong. Something about the way their blackened edges stabbed the air at dusk—each branch twisted differently, appearing just as unexpectedly as the last—caused me to feel as though some unfathomable threat was imminent.

I looked upon myself suddenly at a distance. The perspective changed abruptly to where it seemed my body had enlarged itself, as if the frame through which I observed those events had withdrawn. I could see a gun over my shoulder—as was common years ago, more to quiet my thoughts while looking for birds than to actually fire at them.

After watching myself depart for several moments, hearing my own footsteps rake the ground, I looked again toward that minacious forest. It was darkening quickly, but still my gaze remained at length. —Finally I beheld a slight movement within the closest trees....Or did I really? It vanished as quickly as it emerged.

## III.

A long time passed before I did confirm what I had seen. Dark forms swept between those black pillars, not high enough to be part of the woods, and, though almost imperceptibly, I was certain they drew closer, for something kept me fixated upon them—probably my apprehension which had grown from the beginning.

They were not broken shadows, as I had feigned belief. Once clearly in sight, I wished for longer delay immediately. —They had slowly cut across the forest, obscured for a while by the distance and its blighted forms; they were dark *figures*.

Three of them walked upright in my direction. In the withered light, I could only see their outlines, but even those looked strange—they were gnarled-seeming, amorphous; like specters on the horizon, though more distinctly present. The ill-formed bunch moved slowly, but in a determined way—so greater urgency arose, when I saw they followed my path exactly.

#### IV.

I no longer watched myself, but looked directly through mine eyes. Having reached the end of that lane, a sharp turn right had led me to an un-paved road, wider but just as isolated; the only difference seemed that man had there wrought a greater impact.

On either side lay a ruined meadow, choked by noxious growth. There was evidence still of its having stood open, no doubt vibrantly, making possible a distant view. Now it looked over-run with brambles; young pine trees grew in knots. The whole scene oddly resembled my state-of-being—what promised well had been invaded; nothing remained but a fight to survive.

With every few steps, I glanced behind me. The common fear of being watched intensified to outright paranoia—I *knew* that something followed close, though I saw nothing.

My whole life passed again, with every moment. Never were they so much desired—or so poorly enjoyed. Each moment fell upon the last, nothing to its successor; everything had come to strides upon the ground.

#### V.

Time passed in agony—almost enough for comfort to return. I was on the verge of allowing myself to hope: “I just might get through safely”—when I turned forwards yet again, and caught them bearing down on me.

They were nearly a gunshot away, moving steadily, though not so fast to justify *overlapping* me, as they did. All the while, I had walked hurriedly—somehow they had traversed the meadow un-detected, with speed enough to doubly gain their loss beforehand. I was astonished! But when I saw they did not slow a bit—intending to overtake me—panic *struck*, like from a poisoned fang, and I took off.

Visibly they gained no speed, yet I could not break the distance. My legs *tore* at the ground—head bent, I flung myself away—but at fifty yards they remained! Exasperated, I re-traced my steps to where the roads met, hearing all the while: This is no good. They will *never* stop. —I was afraid of running, that it would only provoke them, but I could not walk forever....Finally, this in-decision proved too much. I slowed to wait for them.

But just as I expected—nothing changed. They split our gap in half, without care. It took them only seconds.

Now I had reached a point truly dangerous. It seemed I had tried everything, only to worsen the effects of their ceaseless pursuit with each attempt. Besides a last resort, no options were left. —And I *liked* knowing it. Really I wanted nothing else.

## VI.

Another moment brought their scabrous points to thirty feet. Limbs swirled in darkness, already with a crippling force. So in hatred of my endless fear, I screamed a vile oath—and emptied the magazine right into them.

They fell as if from a hundred feet. I had swung the shotgun to and fro, to make use of its pattern, and they did not move—or so much as *twitch*, upon the ground.

All of them lay together in a heap—just a dark and lifeless mound, as if they had never been otherwise. Were the dirt road not in contrast, they would have vanished completely. But no less vivid was their destruction. In the blink of an eye, I had reduced my *unfathomable* threat to *part* of the darkness from whence it emerged. —

Yet I hardly felt better. All had quieted, and that darkness seemed farther away—but precisely from this shock came a terror; it was too primitive for description.

No longer afraid to show my fear by running, I took off through my original steps. The only freedom was reckless abandon. So I ran toward where I began. There at least I had not suffered *physical* harm.

I withdrew once more and saw myself race down that wooded path. In the opposite direction and from a distance, it now seemed far less menacing. But perhaps I was deceived by the thickness of night. —Back near the crossroads, a cluster of dark figures joined my path from around the trees.

There were *four* of them, now. They were after me just as before.

## VII.

I jolted awake. My heart was pounding, my body lathered in sweat, but I had grasped the lasting *terror* that was needed.

I did not want to let "this purpose cool"<sup>3</sup>—for such intensity was the very point. So I let my feet crash on the floor, then rushed across the room to my desk. Quickly, and in great agitation, I turned on a lamp and wrote the following page:

—Notes on Levinas—

What Levinas implies, but never addresses fully, is the *purely negative* relationship between subject and object—the pathetic gasps of desperation by a solitary subject *mortally* exposed to “the frothing foam”<sup>4</sup> of “anonymous being”<sup>5</sup>—which threatens each instant to devour that subject—to *swallow up* and obliterate all remnants of what he has felt and known.

Against this threat does he endeavor *each time* to posit himself as a subject. In breathless *paranoia of disappearance* does he oppose the unresponsive mass that looms above.

This “rustling of the there is”<sup>6</sup> does not cease because one “takes up a position.”<sup>7</sup> Uncaring, incessantly the “points swarm in darkness”<sup>8</sup> and over each stance that he assumes, this *presence* hangs. So he must continually re-assert himself against “eternal being”<sup>9</sup>—against his own *mortality* in comparison.

When one encounters a corpse—or, especially, when he witnesses the transformation from living, breathing *agent* to lifeless, “blood-boltered”<sup>10</sup> *pile* of decaying flesh—he realizes that the boundary separating his *humanity* from a corporeal lack thereof—from a “formless proliferation”<sup>11</sup>—is paper thin.

Once someone becomes his material *parts*—once his personhood is lost to the anonymous “there is”<sup>12</sup>—there is no greater *horror*, because the certainty of disappearance makes one’s very *will to live* seem futile. One has to ask himself: Why bother finding a place, if all I have will soon be gone?

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare, 64.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 52.

Anastasia Alexandrin

## The Reach



James Pouilliard

## I Had A Ball!

It was before everyone wanted to be famous but not before I wanted to be. It was before the tabloids were all about bad celebrity behavior and, instead, ran cover stories like

### BOY, 10, GIVES BIRTH TO MONSTER!

It was 1964 and I was ten too. I saw that headline on a newspaper in a wire rack next to the gumball machines and the coin-operated pony at a strip mall discount store. It scared the hell out of me. I didn't know a thing like that could happen but there it was in bold letters over a grainy photo of a boy with a grin so big I knew the picture had to be taken before he gave birth to the monster.

In the car on the way home, I worked up the nerve to ask my parents, "Can boys have babies?"

You think you know the answer to that by the time you're ten but, out of the blue, when all you were thinking about was getting your dad to give you a penny for a gumball (because you knew your mom would say gumballs rot your teeth), you discover you've been badly misinformed.

"Of course not," Mom and Dad said in unison, as if they'd been waiting for the question, but I already had concerns about how smart they were and how often they told me the truth.

I never got the rest of the details I wondered about—how much it hurt to give birth to a monster and how it came out of you and did the kid who gave birth to the monster live anywhere near me. More than forty years later, I went into labor in the same twin bed where I'd spent plenty of boyhood nights worrying about those questions—and about what grade I was going to get in math, if my mother would

notice I had taken money out of her change purse and whether, when the time came, I'd know what to do with a girl.

It was the week before Christmas in the worst year of my life. I'd gone to bed early and, on the way, pulled out a bottle I kept hidden in my underwear drawer in case my mother came snooping. A couple of glasses of Jack helped knock me out.

I woke up in the dark with a pain in my groin so bad it radiated down my legs and up to my throat and seemed to suck the air out of me. When I threw off the covers what I saw made me wish I was only dreaming. Down past gray chest hair and a fat gut was a scrotum like a pink balloon about to burst.

In the room of my childhood nightmares, I did the same thing I would have done at ten. I closed my eyes, threw back my head and didn't care how much like a scared sissy I sounded when I hollered for my mother.

####

When I interviewed for my first newspaper job and an editor asked me to tell him about a news story that made an impression on me, I didn't mention the one about the boy and the monster. It was a few years after Watergate; Woodward and Bernstein were the superstars of print media. So what if investigative journalism was a completely different job than reporting local news for a paper in upstate New York; Bob and Carl were the role models you named to say you were hungry.

Not that I was all that hungry, but I liked writing and I hadn't entirely forgotten about wanting to be famous. The bigger ambitions of my childhood (pitcher, president) looked well out of reach, but a byline in a newspaper was at least a local fame.

I got the job, maybe because the tired editor who interviewed me didn't want to hear about Woodward and Bernstein from even one more kid. I kept my nose in my work, got paid a little more every year and let go of old dreams. I didn't mind much when other reporters moved on to better papers in bigger markets. Somewhere along the line I got comfortable with the idea of spending a whole career in one place—lulled into complacency, you might say, so much so that I missed the cues that it wasn't going to happen. I knew all the bad news—falling circulation, budget cuts, the internet challenge to print media—and still didn't think I'd get the boot. But then we got sold

and it took the new owner all of eighteen months to run what was left of a ninety-year-old newspaper into the ground. I was invited to clean out my desk the week before the 2008 market meltdown; fat chance I was going to pick up another newspaper job.

Instead, I spent a few months focused on my drinking, adjusting my start time from just before the evening news to late afternoon to anytime after lunch. An evening out meant I was on a barstool next to somebody who could fake a little pity for a guy nursing the worry that he might need to give up his lousy apartment and move back into his mother's house. A man in his fifties living with a mother in her eighties is a man to feel sorry for and I felt sorry for me.

My little brother, who sells high-end real estate in Palm Beach and has a wife who can't stand our mother, told me moving in with Mom would be a blessing in disguise. He made it sound like she needed a caretaker more than I needed a rent-free roof over my head. I knew he was thinking it would get him off the hook of having her at his house for six weeks every winter.

"Your brother says you need to move home, Jimmy. I don't know why I'm hearing it from him. Are you waiting for an invitation?" That was the message Mom left on my answering machine fifteen minutes later, ignoring whatever coaching my brother offered about timing or how to make me feel less pathetic.

###

When I woke up in the hospital, everything was fuzzy.

"Hello, dear," said my mother's voice. "How are you feeling?"

But it was another face that loomed over mine. Its mouth said, "You've been through a lot, Jim. We've never seen anything like it, but you're going to be fine." She came into focus as she spoke—pulled-back hair, a blue sweater over a nurse's uniform—and I felt her lower the sheet that was pulled to my chin.

"Let me get you cleaned up," she said, slipping a hand behind my shoulders and undoing my johnny coat just before I panicked at the sight of milk leaking from my big red nipples.

"They don't think it's a good idea for you to breastfeed," said my mother.

I saw her then, sitting in a chair by the window, white hair glowing in the winter sunlight. She was holding a bottle for something swaddled on her lap. I could only see its lips sucking hard at the plastic nipple. "He's almost done," she said. "Do you want to burp him?"

Come to find out, when they take out one of your balls, they do it through your gut (it surprised me too—kind of the long way to China), so you might say I had a Caesarian section. You might say a lot of things; the doctors did. They mentioned conditions I'd never heard of only to tell me that what I had was something else entirely. My brother used to be my left testicle and unlike anything any of the doctors had seen, or any case in the literature, he was out now and alive and there was only one word for him. What I had was a baby.

My mother wanted to call him Timmy. She tried to pull rank on me—reminding me that she was his real mother—but I had the lying-in-a-hospital-bed advantage and there was no way we were going to be rhyming twins. I gave him the name I'd always wished was mine—Jerry.

My brother called from Florida to say congratulations and that reporters were calling and coming to his door wanting to know if he was another brother of the man who gave birth to his brother. That's what happens if you have an uncommon last name in the internet age; there's no place to hide. Media outlets from around the world were asking him for a comment or family photos or an interview.

"Tell him I said hello, but I can't talk right now," said our mother, her hands full with Jerry.

The hospital was terribly accommodating—the only way to describe setting up a cot for my mother so she could stay with me around the clock. The chief administrator stopped by to personally apologize for an employee leaking word to the media about my experience. He let me know that my medical team would be holding a news conference and asked whether I wanted to participate.

I slept on and off for most of the day but I was awake that evening when my mother's internal clock said it was time for Bill O'Reilly. Despite what I had told her, she

had an abiding faith that Bill wouldn't say the things he did if they weren't true—kind of like my childhood reaction to *Boy, 10, Gives Birth to Monster!*

"Oh, Jimmy, look!" she said, when she turned on the television and there, right next to Bill's big head, was a grainy cell phone picture of me taken through my hospital room door—no doubt by the same person who tipped the world off to a man in his fifties giving birth at the little community hospital in West Sturges, New York.

After Bill briefed his viewers on the details of my story, the shot cut to Sarah Palin, the recently defeated vice presidential candidate, fielding a question about how she thought right-to-life groups would respond to this unusual birth. Governor Palin seemed to think they would be nothing but supportive and expressed her hope that I would soon be heard from on the value of every human life.

"Oh, isn't that nice?" said my mother.

Much later, when she was dozing in the chair by the window, and Jerry had been taken back to the nursery for the night, I was flipping through the TV channels and happened to hear Letterman say my name. "We don't yet know what he's named his ball," said Dave, "but if it's a girl, I'm betting on Lucille."

###

By the next morning, local news shows were opening with reporters outside the hospital or stationed in front of what they described as "the modest bungalow the unemployed lifelong bachelor shares with his elderly mother."

I had a bad feeling about what the media was going to make of a lifelong bachelor who'd just had a baby. My mother had a bad feeling about being called elderly.

I was the third story on the *Today* show. Matt Lauer interviewed my brother and his wife via a live hook-up from their living room. He also had a girl I dated in high school right there in the studio.

"You dated her?" my mother asked. "She's fat."

"She wasn't fat then," I said, as if it was a point worth defending.

Matt asked the high school girlfriend how close we'd been. "Oh, very close," she said, although I barely remembered her and didn't think we'd gone out more than once. "He was a nice boy and always a gentleman."

My mother nodded her approval of my good behavior but I felt even more anxious about being a lifelong bachelor *and* a boy who hadn't tried hard enough in high school.

My brother said I was a great guy and, to prove the point, mentioned that I took care of our eighty-five year old mother."

"Oh, that's bullshit!" Mom yelled. "Give me your phone. How dare he say that?" As she was punching my brother's number, she asked if I didn't think my sister-in-law was wearing too much makeup for seven o'clock in the morning.

Once she made my brother apologize a few times, she told him she had to get back to Jerry, although Jerry hadn't yet been brought into the room.

"I think he's feeling a little jealous of you," she said.

"Sure, Mom," I agreed. "I have no job, no home, one ball and a baby. It's killing him."

My phone was still in my mother's hand when it rang. She said hello and nearly dropped it. Then she held it out to me and whispered as if she was in church, "It's Barbara Walters."

"Barbara Walters?" I said. "How would she get my cell phone number?"

"It's Barbara Walters," my mother hissed, and this time she meant it as an answer to my question.

I was just getting off the phone with Barbara when the pediatrician came in to tell us that Jerry had grown considerably overnight. I guess I never paid enough attention to babies to know that Jerry's first day had been remarkable. He'd started out as pinched-looking as a pair of bound feet but with open space and air to breathe he seemed to unfold. He outgrew the blanket in which he was swaddled, felt heavier each time I held him and soon looked bigger than any newborn. But neither that nor the doctor's warning prepared my mother or me for the little boy a nurse led in by the

hand. Mom sat down hard, shocked at the sight of a boy who looked like one she had raised before.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning, Jimmy," he replied. He had a full set of baby teeth.

"We've never seen anything like it," said the nurse, not for the first time or for the last.

We all agreed not to mention Jerry's overnight growth spurt at the news conference.

I'd sat with reporters and cameramen at plenty of news briefings, but I was never behind the table at one. It all began well enough. I was pushed in a wheelchair into a brightly lit room. My mother kept a hand on my shoulder in a way that made me wonder if she had ever been as proud of me. The doctors emphasized the medical miracle of what had happened and the good news that both Jerry and I were healthy. They were eager for turns at the microphone but the reporters only wanted to hear from me. They started with a softball question on my plans for the future. Then they wanted to know if I was a hermaphrodite, had been receiving any sort of hormone injections, had intended to get pregnant or had ever had a relationship with a woman.

I had been a reporter. I can't say I was surprised.

Finally a deep voice from the back of the room called out the question everybody has about a lifelong bachelor, "Are you a homosexual?"

As if that would explain a man giving birth to his twin.

My mother, unruffled by the suggestion that I might be a hermaphrodite, was suddenly indignant. "A homosexual!" she exclaimed. "For heaven's sake, no." And then, in the bright light of the cameras, she looked down at me and asked, "You're not, are you?"

We were back in my room in time for *The View*. Mom had a hunch that I'd be one of the hot topics Whoopi Goldberg brought up at the beginning of the show and she was right.

Joy Behar said, "Finally! How often have I said that men ought to try giving birth?"

Elisabeth Hasselbeck echoed Sarah Palin's remarks from the O'Reilly show.

Barbara Walters waited patiently through the joking and innuendo and a silly discussion of gender equality to show that she was so much more than a chat show hostess. Sounding supremely well-connected, she said, "Well, I've talked to him ..."

As Barbara quoted me, my mother hung on every word, as if she hadn't heard me say them first.

Apparently my cell phone number made the rounds. While I was still the hot topic on *The View*, Donald Trump called to invite me to participate in the next season of *The Celebrity Apprentice*. I suggested that I wasn't a celebrity but Mr. Trump assured me that I qualified.

My mother didn't watch *The Celebrity Apprentice* and wasn't ready to forgive Donald Trump for his unseemly public feud with Rosie O'Donnell. She had been a regular viewer of Rosie's old afternoon talk show and had a lingering affection for the nice Rosie of those days. "You know," Mom said, "before she was a lesbian."

I promised her there was little chance I would be appearing on *The Celebrity Apprentice*.

"You should hold out for *Dancing with the Stars*," she suggested.

What neither of us understood was that the opportunities were just beginning. It was my brother who anticipated this and who, through business connections, found an agent and a big-name attorney who drove up from New York City and knocked on my hospital room door, eager to represent me.

"This is your time," said the agent. "You've got to grab it by the balls."

Everyone flinched a little.

###

Late that afternoon, when Jerry was sitting on my mother's cot playing with a toy that was briefly age appropriate, a nurse came in to announce that they were moving us to a larger room. Since Jerry was too big to stay in the nursery, the hospital thought it best for us to share a room.

None of the doctors could explain Jerry's ability to talk or how he knew what things were called. They didn't know how he had potty-trained himself overnight or why

he woke up wanting milk from a cup instead of a bottle. Orderlies periodically wheeled him away for tests and returned him with assurances that all his vital signs were strong. They took me for tests too. They groped my remaining testicle, squeezed my tender nipples and muttered behind their masks about things like endocrine glands and hormone levels.

Meanwhile, cards started arriving, many with a dollar or more enclosed for "the family's needs" or "the baby's education." When an anonymous benefactor contacted the hospital to offer financial assistance, I persuaded my mother to take a room at the hotel across the street.

Soon after dinner, Jerry outgrew another t-shirt and pair of pajama pants and a nurse decided to put him to bed in a johnny coat. "After all," she said, "who knows how big he'll be in the morning?"

I liked having him right across the room. He seemed more like a son than a brother and I was proud of what a polite boy he was and how much all the doctors and nurses liked him.

A hospital room is never really dark at night. In the dim glow of it, with sounds from the corridor and a lot to think about, I slept fitfully. When I woke at midnight, I could see that Jerry was awake too and had a hand up to his face.

"You okay, Sport?" I asked.

"My teeth are loose," he said. I got up slowly, sore from the incision in my gut, and walked over to his bed. He had already pulled half a dozen bloody baby teeth and was working on another. I sat with him until he got them all out, waited until he was asleep and slipped a dollar under his pillow.

Hours later, when early sun was showing at the edges of the shade, I heard Jerry breathing hard and sat up fast to check on him. He was on his back, blankets down by his big feet, johnny coat up around his neck, pumping vigorously on his stiff prick.

"I'm so glad he doesn't have acne," our mother said.

"Well, yes," said the renowned gerontologist who flew in to observe a fast-growing baby and met, instead, a tall teenager, "but we need to be more concerned about when Jerry's aging process will stop—or at least slow down."

I knew he was trying to help us maintain a proper perspective but it was hard to worry too much about a boy in such robust good health. Jerry's permanent teeth had come in beautifully overnight. Later that morning, I stood behind him at the bathroom mirror and coached him through his first shave. If anything, seeing our faces side by side, alike and unalike, I was more inclined to worry for wrinkled, paunchy, receding me. And I wasn't the only one.

When Mom and Jerry were both out of the room, one of the doctors stopped by to stare me in the eye and say, "You know, Jim, when you arrived in labor, I could smell the booze on your breath. You were drunk."

"I wouldn't have been if I'd known I was having a baby," I said, but the look on the doctor's face told me he'd heard that before.

"You've got a kid to think about now. Your mother is too old to raise him by herself."

He was right, but that was before Jerry finished growing up a week after he was born.

Once he was an adult, it got harder to tell his age. The doctors kept sampling his blood and urine. They scanned and x-rayed him and performed a battery of psychological tests. It wasn't easy to watch younger versions of myself pass before me like a slide show. It couldn't have been a cakewalk for Jerry to look across the room at what he was expected to become.

On Christmas Day, a week after he was born, I woke up and saw him examining his hands. His nails had needed constant trimming, but that morning the hands he was staring at and the feet he had kicked out from under the bedcovers looked exactly as they had the night before. After breakfast he was wheeled off for another round of tests and I sat and wondered why, if his age sprint was over, he looked so much better than me—Jim without the wear and tear.

Everyone saw the difference between us but Mom was the one who could be counted on for a comment. "Now that you're famous," she said, "maybe you should dye your hair. Or join a gym."

###

The doctors announced Jerry's growth spurt and the end of it at the same news conference. A few days later we moved home. The day after that, my agent showed up with a boy reporter, a photographer and a fat check from one of the tabloids.

Come to find out, those papers aren't all about misbehaving celebrities. I judged that book by its cover. Even though Brad and Angelina usually get the front page (unless Lindsay messed up again, or Jen has a new beau, or Oprah's packing on the pounds), there's room inside for human interest stories like mine. That's how my agent liked to characterize it—a human interest story—although he agreed with Trump that I met the modern definition of celebrity.

"Like the Kardashians or Paris Hilton," he said.

At first I wasn't happy to be compared to those young women, but then he told me how much Jerry and I would be getting from the book deal he negotiated and what Hollywood might be willing to pay for my story. "Who would you like to play you?" he asked. "How about George Clooney?"

It was crazy, of course. But so was a guy in his fifties giving birth to a baby.

I got used to the campout of paparazzi that lasted a few weeks after we moved home. I made it a habit to wave politely.

"Remember where your bread is buttered," my agent always said.

I spent every day with a ghostwriter even though I'd been a writer all my working life. All I had to do was lie on the couch and talk while he sat at a laptop and typed. My publisher expected a completed manuscript in six weeks.

In my spare time, I looked at a few episodes of *Keeping up with the Kardashians* and changed my mind about them. They had made themselves into a lucrative brand simply by convincing the world to pay attention—kind of like Martha Stewart, but without ever having to make a glitter pumpkin or holiday hats, without the joyless perfectionism that made Martha as stiff as a well-beaten egg white.

The book was finished on schedule and the publisher rushed it into print. "In the nick of time," said my agent, nervous that interest in my story could be jeopardized by a new media sensation, a California mother of six who gave birth to octuplets that January. They called her Octomom.

The publisher scheduled a book tour. I was interviewed on TV and radio shows. I made public appearances, did book signings and got invited to parties with real celebrities in New York City and Los Angeles. Women came on to me. So did a few guys. TMZ reported that I was seen with a former girlfriend of Charlie Sheen's. I was famous after all.

Jerry would not come on the road with me. I told him people were interested in both of us, but he suggested that we were not famous for something that anyone should want to be famous for. He said it politely and I understood his point, but still.

While I was on the road, he was planning his future. He wanted a job but lacked the credential of a college degree. Our brother suggested real estate. "Get your license, get some experience, get ready for when the market takes off again," he said to Jerry.

"I don't know," I said. "It's going to be a long time before the housing market's anything like it was." To Jerry, that was confirmation that he'd have to be smart and skillful and hard-working. It sounded challenging and he was a sucker for a challenge.

During our time in the hospital, when our doctors puzzled over how Jerry seemed to know everything that I had ever learned, I regretted not being a better student, not studying harder and reading more. I apologized to him for that and he told me not to worry about it. Eventually I understood why. When he wasn't at his real estate class, or educating himself about home-construction and building codes, or driving around with Mom getting a feel for different neighborhoods and the inventory of homes for sale, he was reading Dostoyevsky and David Foster Wallace and *Moby Dick*; he was doing yoga and learning to drive and taking an online course in Korean because, he explained to me, increasing numbers of Koreans were buying homes in West Sturges.

I was proud of him. Mostly, I was proud.

One morning I got a call from a newspaper editor in Boston who looked me up online out of interest in my story and came across some articles I had written. He praised my writing style and wondered if I'd like to come to Boston to talk with him about a job. He proposed a date on which I had a book signing in Baltimore and another when I was scheduled to appear on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*

When I kept having excuses, he said, "Maybe what I should have asked first is if you're interested in getting back to work."

I thought I should be, but I really couldn't say. It felt like a choice between hard and easy and I heard the expectation that I should choose hard because it's the only choice most people have, the only one they want anyone else to have. I asked if I could call him back and told Jerry that the guy was only interested in me because I was a man who'd had a baby.

"That's why Jimmy Kimmel is interested in you," said Jerry. "This man sounds interested in your work."

I knew he meant it as a compliment, but I wished I wasn't being complimented over the top of *The Brothers Karamazov*, which he was reading and I had never read and guessed I never would.

###

I never thought of Las Vegas as a place to sell a book—or buy a book, or read a book—but, lucky for me, people who publish and sell books like to do the same things as people in every other business. My guess is that plenty of them ran up their company credit cards while working as little as possible at the Great Western Book Fair which, the year I went, was at Caesars Palace. For a few hours every day I stood at my publisher's booth talking to conventioneers and signing copies of *I Had a Ball!*

I didn't even mind much when some yahoo in a straw Stetson slung his arm over my shoulder and got his whiskey breath real close to my face and said, "So listen, with just the one nut, does your dougie still work?"

I got asked that a lot. I was used to it. It still worked. And I was in Las Vegas.

I loved every too big, too bright, all night, artificial thing about it. I loved getting to go there all expenses paid and still spend too much of my own money. I loved

getting told I was cute by a girl thirty years younger than me who had never been Charlie Sheen's girlfriend (no matter what TMZ said) but had once had her picture taken with him. I loved winning big with her at my side and I loved the sexy pouty face she made when I didn't win, which was a lot more often. I took her anywhere she wanted to go and she came to bed with me with all her makeup on.

That first time in Vegas, I met a producer from *The Amazing Race* who shouted to me in a loud room that it would be great if Jerry and I would run the *Race*. I called home from my cell phone and handed it to the producer so he could ask Jerry himself. The girl who had never really dated Charlie Sheen was running her hands up inside my jacket when I saw the producer shake his head to tell me no, it was no dice with Jerry.

It was hard to focus with those hands on me and I just shrugged a shoulder at the producer as if to say, "What can I do?" But I was always meaning to have a talk with Jerry, to interrupt his chronic self-improvement and let him know that I could use a little help from him to keep our free ride from running off the road.

After Vegas, there wasn't much more travel. The book tour wound down to lesser cities and smaller crowds and then it was over. I thought of Andy Warhol's prediction about everyone's fifteen minutes of fame. He underestimated, but not by much.

My agent thought I'd missed a real opportunity with *The Celebrity Apprentice*. He mentioned that every time I said no to something that sounded worse. The last time I heard from him, talk about a movie deal had died.

I still got offers. People got my phone number or wrote to my publisher but the stuff they proposed was sometimes downright freaky. I knew how much worse it could get when I read about an adult entertainment company willing to pay the Octomom a million dollars to make a porno. I hoped she wouldn't do it but I had no idea how a single mother with fourteen kids could support herself once the world lost interest.

###

Eighteen months after publication my book was on the remainder shelves at Barnes & Noble for \$3.98. You could get copies for even less on Amazon.

By then, Jerry was selling houses and I was back to drinking in my old bedroom at Mom's. There was no point to moving out when I was mostly on the road and nothing comfortable about the idea once the easy money stopped. Alone in the dark in that old twin bed I got nostalgia hard-ons for women who had wanted pictures taken with me. I missed the ka-ching of every full price book sale and the great cities I'd been to and I especially missed Las Vegas. The more nights I spent in my boyhood bedroom the more I wanted to feel as good as I felt in the last place I felt really good, even if I had to go back on my own dime. I tried to talk Jerry into taking a vacation with me but he wouldn't do it. Our brother told him that, in any economy, there are people who dig in and do well and Jerry dug in.

I ran through a lot of money the first time I was in Vegas but I was sure it would be worth whatever I spent to be there again. I called the girl who never really dated Charlie Sheen and she met me at one of the casinos for a couple of drinks. She had puffy lips that hadn't been that way before and it was hard not to wonder if they could hurt you. After an hour of watching me lose at craps, she said she had to go and I didn't really mind.

When I dropped more money than I meant to and it bothered me more than I thought it would, I took a long walk up the Strip through all the bright lights I had loved not many months before. But like the girl who was never Charlie's or mine, they didn't look the same.

It was close to morning when I flopped into bed and not much later when I had my other ball delivered. A nurse held up the distended skin of my empty scrotum between a gloved thumb and forefinger and asked, "What do we want to do with this, Doctor?"

I think I was trying to scream when I woke up.

After a long shower, I called the airline to change my ticket.

I got home just after dinner and found Mom and Jerry in the dining room finishing dessert with the girlfriend Jerry had met at work, an attorney who handled the closing on a house he sold. She was twenty-five years younger and looked just right for him.

The first time they went out, they talked until it was time for breakfast and I told Jerry not to get too serious too fast—as if he had ever been interested in my advice.

Mom and Jerry said hello and the girlfriend smiled.

"This is my son Jimmy," my mother said. "He's a former newsman."

*A former newsman.* Formerly newsworthy. That stung.

I went into the kitchen, poured myself a cup of coffee and carried it back to the table. Jerry's girlfriend was telling my mother how delicious her pie was and complimenting its perfect crust. She offered to help clear the dishes, but Mom told her I would do that and sent the lovebirds into the living room.

We set the dishes beside the sink and Mom rinsed them off before handing them to me to load into the dishwasher.

"Isn't she nice?" she asked.

I agreed she was.

"And pretty," Mom said.

I agreed again.

"I think Jerry's serious," she said.

"It looks like he is."

"You know, Jimmy," she said, "it's not too late for you to find someone."

"Mom," I said, "did you have to call me a former newsman?"

"I'm sorry, dear," my mother said. "What should I call you?" She handed me another dripping dish, put her rubber-gloved hand on my sleeve and waited to hear.

Anastasia Alexandrin

## In My Body



## Malthusian Knot

Henry David Thoreau once said, "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude," and in keeping with this, I take at least one solitary float each year (though not without my dog), usually on the Saint Francis. To my knowledge, she's the only navigable river in Missouri where a person can float three days without seeing another human being, and there's a reason.

The upper Saint Francis is a hard section of river. This year, the sixteen-mile stretch between E Highway at Creek Nation, and the Saco bridge at Highway C claimed

my cooler of food, an untapped bottle of Jack Daniels, my favorite hat, and a mask and snorkel I'd had for ten years. Her mood can change in an instant, and when she's too high she's deadly, claiming a number of lives every year, and when too low, a person can find themselves dragging a heavy boat through labyrinthine miles of boulder-strewn

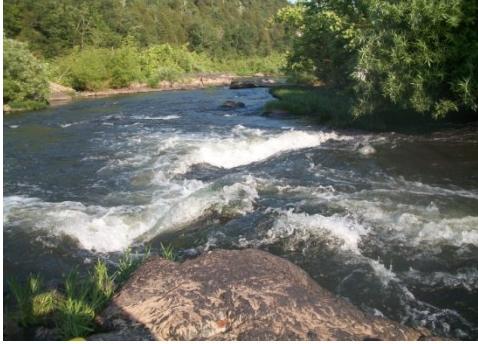


gravel. She's full of big gar, biting turtles, and cottonmouths. Sections of her are bordered by hundred-foot granite cliffs riddled with timber rattlers and copperheads, and she's choked with downed trees, treacherous boat-destroying shut-ins, and swarms of vicious deerflies. There's little vehicle access into much of the riverbottom, so when someone gets in trouble in there, they're likely to stay in it for awhile. My friend Matt is allergic to deerflies, and on his first Saint Francis trip (in deerfly off-season) a random bite swelled his knee up until he could barely bend it. I'm afraid if he went in June he'd have to be airlifted out. When I got off the river yesterday evening and arrived home, I was too beaten to even take a bath before falling asleep, and when I woke up this morning, I was so sore I could barely move.

Yet these trips are what I look forward to all year. This river possesses a grandeur only found in otherwise hostile things, places, or situations. I take these trips because the Saint Francis clears my mind, and from a geological perspective, she has an unsurpassed magnificence when compared to any other river in the state. It was this sense of rugged beauty that attracted Edward Abbey to the deserts of the American southwest where he said, "everything either stings, stabs, stinks, or sticks."<sup>1</sup>



Abbey came from humble background, once writing, "I am a redneck...born and bred on a submarginal farm in Appalachia, descended from an endless line of lug-eared, beetle-browed, insolent barbarian peasants..."<sup>2</sup> but he was brilliant, and he had that gift of uncanny foresight that only brilliant men possess. A classmate from his small Appalachian school said later in life, "One statement I remember Ed Abbey making was in a science class. We were talking about atoms; in those days no high school students heard very much about atoms. And Ed said, if anybody can ever split the atom, they'll unleash all kinds of power,"<sup>3</sup> and like Leonard Hall, who published *Stars Upstream* in 1958—an exceptional book about the future of the Current and Jacks Fork Rivers—Abbey could clearly see how Western Civilization and its inherent commercialization would inevitably defile our country's ecosystems. Abbey was a man who said—long before it was politically-correct to be green—that growth for the sake of growth was the ideology of the cancer cell, and that the most glorious spectacle he'd ever seen was the sight of a billboard burning against the night sky.

When I was a boy in the '70s, I remember floating Black River in Reynolds County Missouri and looking over the side of the boat at a river full of fish and turtles. Today, for all practical purposes, this stretch of the Black is devoid of fish, and the

When I was a boy in the '70s, I remember floating Black River in Reynolds County Missouri and looking over the side of the boat at a river full of fish and turtles. Today, for all practical purposes, this stretch of the Black is devoid of fish, and the

Meramec, Current, and Jacks Fork are so congested with weekend warriors that they're rarely worth visiting. So, by '95 I'd given up commercialized streams and taken my first solo trip on the Saint Francis. I remember it well because I spent a long half-night wrapped in a cold wet military-issue mummy bag after I woke up choking on water when the river suddenly rose five feet, flooding my tent and ruining a 35mm camera that belonged to the company I worked for. There hadn't been a cloud in the sky.

Back then there were no eagles on the river, but due to a reintroduction program, they're now reasonably prolific. Yet their cry is still not something I'm accustomed to, and being as conditioned by movies as anyone else, everytime I hear



one scream I look up at the cliffs expecting to see an Osage in full black war-paint. This entire riverbasin had been theirs when Europeans arrived, and one of my favorite passages is from an Osage named Big Soldier who told George Silby,

I see and admire your manner of living, your good warm houses, your extensive fields of corn, your gardens, your cows, oxen, work-horses, wagons, and a thousand machines, that I know not the use of. I see that you are able to clothe yourself, even from weeds and grass. In short you can do almost what you choose. You whites possess the power of subduing almost every animal to your use. You are surrounded by slaves. Everything about you is in chains, and you are slaves yourselves. I hear I should exchange my presents for yours, [yet] I too should become a slave. Talk to my sons, perhaps they may be persuaded to adopt your fashions, or at least to recommend them to their sons; but for myself, I was born free, was raised free, and wish to die free.<sup>4</sup>

Abbey once said that American Indians had no word for what we call wilderness. For them the wilderness was home, and I think the human mind is still, to a fairly large extent, programmed to live in the environment that shaped it, as opposed to the synthetic one it's created. If not, I don't think we would have such a plethora of

psychological problems permeating society. Mark Jenkins said in *The Hard Way* that "what all grubby anthropologists worth their weight in bones already know, and what too many urban philosophers haven't figured out, is that humans evolved as hardy outdoor animals. Two million years of running naked across the veld hardwired us for life in the wilderness. Confine humans in a cage, physical or psychological, and like every other creature on this good earth, we become flaccid, febrile, and feckless."<sup>5</sup> Abbey would have agreed, having once wrote,



The chief reason so many people are fleeing the cities at every opportunity to go tramping, canoeing, skiing into the wilds is that wilderness offers a taste of adventure, a chance for the rediscovery of our ancient, preagricultural, preindustrial freedom. Forest and desert, mountain and river, when ventured upon in primitive terms, allow us a sort of Proustian recapture, however superficial and brief, of the rich sensations of our former existence, our basic heritage of a million years of hunting, gathering, wandering. This elemental impulse still survives in our blood, nerves, dreams, and desires, suppressed but not destroyed by the mere five thousand years of agricultural serfdom, a mere two hundred years of industrial peonage, which culture has attempted to impose on what evolution has designed as a feeling, thinking, liberty-loving animal. I say culture, not civilization; civilization remains the ideal, an integrated realization of our intellectual, emotional and physical gifts which humankind as a whole has nowhere yet obtained.<sup>6</sup>

Abbey also said in regard to Western Civilization (though he refused to call it such), that "instead of mountain men we are cursed with a plague of diggers, drillers, borers, grubbers; of asphalt spreaders, dam-builders, over-grazers, clear-cutters and strip-miners whose object seems to be to make our mountains match our men—making molehills out of mountains for a race of rodents—for the rat race," <sup>7</sup> and that "like apes



in a zoo, we spend our energies on the one field of play remaining; human lives are otherwise pretty well caged in by the walls, bars, chains, and locked gates of our industrial culture."<sup>8</sup>

Even yet, Abbey was not, I think, *a hater* of Western Civilization. He ate of its fruits as much as I or anyone else. I enjoy laying in air-conditioning and watching movies, and I like living in a house made of wood, and reading books fashioned from the same trees. I also like being part of the information age. When I think of a world without technology, I'm reminded of a scene in *Dances with Wolves* when John Dunbar finds a man's skeleton on the prairie, and Timmons chuckles and says, "Somebody back east is sayin' 'Why don't he write?'" And, like so many others, I don't remember how I ever got by without the internet. It has streamlined communication, and efficient access to data is paramount to raising awareness of critical issues.

What I hate—and what I think Abbey hated—was the imbalance Western Civilization has imposed upon the natural world—antigodlin is an old Ozark term that comes to mind. The world is antigodlin. Aldo Leopold understood this disparity back in 1948 when he said in *A Sand County Almanac* that "we all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, long life, and dullness. The deer strives with his supple legs, the cowman with trap and poison, the statesman with pen, the most of us with machines, votes, and dollars, but it all comes to the same thing: peace in our time. A measure of success in this is all well enough, and perhaps it is a requisite to objective thinking, but too much

safety seems to yield only danger in the long run. Perhaps this is behind Thoreau's dictum: In wilderness is the salvation of the world." <sup>9</sup>

When I reached the foot of Stumbeaug Mountain, I banked my kayak and dug a pipe out of my drybag before sitting down in the water to relax. A belted kingfisher had just rattled across the river, dipped and snatched up a fish, then wheeled around and disappeared into the forest when I noticed a small spider on the stem of my pipe and flicked him into the water. I'd finished Janine Benyus's *Biomimicry* just the week before, and I remembered a passage about Kevlar. It's made by heating petroleum up to 1400° F and then bubbling it in sulfuric acid before pulling it out under enormous pressures with an extraordinary waste of time, resources, and energy. But a spider can eat insects and process them into a web, which—ounce for ounce—is five times the strength of steel, and able to absorb five times the impact Kevlar can—all done with water-based chemistry at room-temperature.

And a metaphor for the renovation of our Rube Goldberg device-like industrialized culture scurried back toward me across the surface of the water and up onto the bank where he vanished into the rocks. To think that most of the positive aspects of our culture cannot be had without all the negative is to slip, I think, and I hope, into the fallacy of false dilemma.



I teach writing for a living and I think it's important because a good piece of writing is one of the few lasting things a person can leave behind them. I'm particularly drawn to poetry, because of its conciseness, and I always try to remember Chief Joseph's saying that it takes few words to speak the truth, and Thoreau's, that "you must work very long to write short sentences." Thoreau also said that those who hear the rippling of rivers will not utterly despair of anything, and I've been warding off despair much of my adult life by listening to them speak. So I understand Leonard Hall when he said, "a river does have a voice. And it has a story to tell—for anyone who will learn its language and listen with an understanding ear." <sup>10</sup>

Several weeks ago I was fortunate enough to publish a poem about the Saint Francis after having carefully listened to what she's told me over the course of these many years. The poem's called "Twelvemile Creek"<sup>11</sup> and it's about the toll Western Civilization has taken on the Saint Francis, and it's a piece I hope will be around long after I've passed. It was influenced by the work of Joseph Bruchac. I brought a copy of his autobiography, *At the End of Ridge Road*, with me on my float this year, and as I was drying out from my first capsizing—courtesy of the shut-ins just past Marble Creek—I came across this passage..."The Puritans desperately wanted us all, Indian and European alike, to hear Time's winged chariot drawing near at our backs. Enough of lazing around, enough of hunting and fishing, gathering medicine plants and speaking prayers of thanksgiving. Enough of caring for elders and playing unhurriedly with the children, eating good food that does not make one sick, sleeping when tired, waking when one has rested long enough.

Although centuries have passed, their message, the tyranny of time, remains the same. Wake to the alarm clock. Leave the comfort of your home and drive through mind-numbing traffic in the metal-enclosed company of strangers on a superhighway as clogged as your veins have become from too much cholesterol. It is time to lift and carry things you will never own, time to put on a paper hat and serve fat-soaked food from behind a counter, or time—if you are especially lucky—to sit behind a desk and press the keys of a computer. All this while your spirit longs only to be away from it all, to be somewhere green and quiet.<sup>12</sup>

When I reached the mouth of Twelvemile Creek, I heard a few of the last cicadas of brood XIX. They won't be back again until the summer of 2024, and it occurred to me how much clearer would be our course of digression should we only get an eight-week glimpse of the world once every thirteen years. Familiarity



blinds. It also gradually desensitizes, and fosters intellectual inertia.

Like Abbey, my education is in philosophy and English, and I think that if I could have any one wish, it would be for a restructured educational system that fostered the study of ethics and logic in every child from an early age—especially in regard to our place in the natural world. If this were so, we would be far better equipped not only to deal with the enormous problems facing the planet, but also better able to avoid many of the same issues in the future. Much of my work has been criticized for its irreverent and even contemptuous tone in trying to address these matters, but I don't think writing should be the catalyst of a popularity contest. It should be about the genuine nature of its subject matter—and it's not the things being done correctly that warrant consideration. In this respect, Abbey was of the same mind, and the older I get, the more I appreciate the cantankerous bastard. He was an honest writer in a world where people like honesty in theory, but rarely in practice. Unadulterated truth and political-correctness seldomly dovetail. Speaking once to a symposium in Colorado, he told the audience "I am pleased to be invited to Vail to speak about overpopulation, overcrowding, war, pollution, urban squalor, mental anguish, social injustice, vanishing wildlife, the break-down of the family, starvation, civil war, ski resorts, and women. World misery is my favorite subject, and I am always happy to talk about it."<sup>13</sup>

So, if I'm driving my car down the highway and it overheats, it's not going to do



any good to keep driving and focus my attention on the new tires I've just bought. We, as a species, are driving down that road right now. The days of the crazy hippie standing on the lunatic fringe of society, and waving his sign that reads "the end is nigh" are over. It *is* nigh. It's nigh because of an

exponentially expanding world population where the least intelligent people rapidly out-reproduce the more gifted, and all the Judeo-Christian politically-correct egalitarian bullshit ideology in the world does not change this one simple fact. It's nigh because we've woven greed so tightly into the fabric of Western Civilization that we don't even question its destructive nature and inevitable outcome. It's nigh because of religious zealousness born of beliefs founded in myth and self-interest, and the false sense of certainty it breeds. It's nigh because a mere three-hundred years after being populated by Stone Age people, America—the most influential country in the world—begets *college students*, who, on average, can identify over a thousand corporate logos, yet cannot at the same time name ten plants or animals native to their own soil, and it's nigh, because, as Aldo Leopold warned us sixty-three years ago, "our bigger-and-better society is now like a hypochondriac, so obsessed with its own economic health as to have lost the capacity to remain healthy."<sup>14</sup>

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## Contributors' Notes

**Anastasia Alexandrin** was born in Ukraine and came to the U.S. at age five. At an early age she enrolled at Barnstone Studios in Coplay, Pennsylvania. She studied there for eight years learning the fundamentals of drawing and design and continued her studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Since graduating from PAFA, her award-winning drawings have been exhibited regionally and nationally.

**David R. Cravens** received his undergraduate degree in philosophy at the University of Missouri during which he spent a semester in West Africa studying eastern philosophy. Afterward, he spent several years working as a scuba-diving instructor in the Bahamas, the Florida Keys, the Turneffe Islands of Belize, and the Channel Islands of Southern California before returning to Southeast Missouri State University where he earned his master's degree in English literature. He's a member of Phi Kappa Phi, Magna Cum Laude, Sigma Tau Delta, The National Eagle Scout Association, and Mensa. He received the 2008 Saint Petersburg Review Prize in Poetry, the 2011 Bedford Poetry Prize, and was a finalist for Ohio State University's The Journal William Allen Creative Nonfiction Contest. His work has also appeared in *EarthSpeak Magazine*, *The Houston Literary Review*, *Albatross*, *The Monarch Review*, and *Mension: The Newsletter of Mid-America Mensa*. He's an adjunct Professor of English Studies for Central Methodist University as well as an English Instructor at Mineral Area College where he teaches literature and composition.

**Edward A. Dougherty** lives and works in Corning, NY, and is the author of *Pilgrimage to a Gingko Tree* (2008 WordTech) and *Part Darkness, Part Breath* (2008 Plain View) as well as four chapbooks of poetry, most recently *The Luminous House* (2007 Finishing Line) and *Backyard Passages* (forthcoming, FootHills Publishing). *Exercises for Poets: Double Bloom*, co-authored with Scott Minar, is a collection of exercises for classes or

writing groups. He was given the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Activities.

**Edwin Lyngar** graduated from Antioch University in 2010 with his MFA in creative writing and also holds an MA from the University of Nevada Reno. His work has appeared in the *Bellingham Review*, numerous local newspapers and in special interest magazines. He has recently completed an unpublished memoir titled *Guy Parts*, about masculinity, fatherhood and divorce. He lives in Reno with his wife and five children.

**Marina Petrova** was born in Moscow, Russia but has lived in the South, Midwest and finally New York. She has worked in Advertising and Media Technology but recently gave it up to pursue an MFA in Creative Nonfiction at The New School. She lives in New York City with her husband, her six-year old son and her cocker spaniel.

**William Pomeroy** lives with his wife in Greenwich Village. He writes as often as possible, which is never quite enough.

**James Pouilliard**, a former business magazine publisher, lives with his wife in Harwinton, Connecticut. His short stories have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Best Fiction*, *The Delmarva Review*, *The Quotable* and *Temenos*. He has published flash fiction in *Boston Literary Magazine*, and at [100WordStory.org](http://100WordStory.org).

**Mike Sukach's** fiction and poetry is forthcoming in the 2012/3 Winter editions of *theNewerYork*, *Cellpoems*, and *Medusa's Kitchen*. His poetry has appeared in *The Blast Furnace* and he was recently selected as a finalist in the *Sow's Ear Poetry Review's* 2012 poetry competition. His poetry is also anthologized in *Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors*, published by Southeast Missouri State University Press. Closer look: <http://www.mksukach.com/>.